

Laying a foundation for Clinical Librarianship in India

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A clinical librarian takes the library and the librarian's skills to the point of care, and provides clinicians with evidence that helps them offer the best care to patients. The role of the clinical librarian includes answering the immediate needs of clinicians for patient care, provide literature searches and articles to support the evidence, support the development of new guidelines based on all activities carried out under this role and proactively create resources for evidence based care. The history of clinical librarianship in the developed countries is a couple of decades old. Clinical librarianship would be a boon to India. Doctors in India are forever hard pressed for time – and in fact they see far more patients than their colleagues in the developed nations. The presence of high quality Clinical Librarians could make a world of difference to the care they provide patients. In addition, if the development of this profession is considered very seriously, it would be a great alternative career opportunity for the thousands of aspiring students who do not get admission to medical colleges, giving them the satisfaction of being in the medical field. And if guidelines and treatment outcomes based on these activities are documented and made available on the web, the resource would be invaluable for doctors across the country. This paper suggests an outline of steps involved for creating and offering a Clinical Librarianship programme in India.

Introduction

A clinical librarian takes the library and the librarian's skills to the point of care, and provides clinicians with evidence that helps them offer the best care to patients. The role of the clinical librarian includes answering the immediate needs of clinicians for patient care, providing literature searches and articles to support the evidence, supporting the development of new guidelines based on all activities carried out under this role and proactively creating resources for evidence based care. The history of clinical librarianship goes back approximately to

about 20 years, but even now it is restricted only to some parts of developed nations like the USA, UK and some others. In India, we do not even have a course for general medical librarianship. The National Medical Library at Delhi used to offer a short training course, but even this was discontinued around 1998. India is a country which could do full justice to using good Clinical Librarians. Doctors in India see far more patients in an average working day, compared to their counterparts in the developed world. Many of them are very open in declaring that they have hardly any time to do significant reading. A huge majority of doctors have also expressed that they waste too much time searching for information. Many of the Internet-savvy doctors have also admitted to this author that they are unaware of the intricacies of PubMed searching for Evidence, and of other Evidence based resources. Training programs in searching and critical appraisal are far too few in our country, though the few that are offered have been useful. If we can create good clinical librarians in India, and parallelly offer a large number of training programs in the practice of Evidence Based Healthcare, we can not only improve our healthcare delivery standards, but an additional by product that can emerge is the production of good local health research which in future will be more useful and relevant to local needs.

Clinical Librarianship:

A clinical librarian is one who takes the library to the point of care. The term has evolved over the years, and an alternative name that came up first in the year 2002 was – “The Informationist” (to sound on the same level as a Gastroenterologist, Cardiologist, etc.) Another paper in this conference discusses the concept of Clinical Librarianship, so this paper will focus more on the need for this in India, and how we should proceed to create such professionals.

The need for Clinical Librarians - especially in India

The need for clinical librarians who will save precious time for physicians who are always

short of it, and who will by their services, contribute to enhancement of patient care, has been established in several studies. However, even with concrete proof of the same, the evolution of such professionals has been slow even in the developed countries that proved the need for the same. The classical article "The Informationist" was written by two doctors, and yet, the concept has been slow in acceptance.

In the Indian context, there are two reasons for serious consideration of the need for Clinical Librarians. One is that doctors in India are harder pressed for time than their counterparts in other developed countries. They see far more patients than these colleagues on an average day, because of India's huge population. But, while our Indian population has been termed a bane most of the time, it is up to us to convert this to a boon, to the maximum extent possible. We have a huge number of candidates who try for medical college seats every year, and a huge percentage of these candidates do not make it to the MBBS or the other related courses. Many choose to do degrees that have nothing to do with medicine / biology or related subjects. If these candidates could do a degree in Science followed by degrees in Information Sciences with a specialization in Medical / Clinical librarianship, we could come up with a new tribe of professionals who would be in the medical profession – deeply involved in a non-practice area. These professionals may gain tremendous satisfaction in contributing to patient care through a very different approach.

What kind of professionals do we need as Clinical Librarians?

Clinical librarians need to work in such a way that they are able to provide information to doctors that quickly helps them make decisions for treatment and diagnosis. In addition, they need to provide them with information that overall helps them stay updated and provide better facilities for their patients in preventive care and wellness. Such information professionals need to go one step further than provision of information, they need to be an integral part of patient care. This means, that they need to have the following:

- a) Expertise in Information Services
- b) Sound knowledge of fundamentals of human biology and related fields
- c) Other human traits that are required for the practice of medicine – a spirit of inquiry, service and dedication

The first two are academic cum professional requirements. In order to fulfill these, we need people who have done a basic degree (B.Sc) in subjects like Life Sciences / Microbiology / Home-Science / Nutrition etc, followed by a Masters in Library & Information Sciences. This needs to be further followed by an intensive 6-month course in Medical librarianship. Alternative ideas are:

- a) Incorporating Medical librarianship as an elective in the Master's course
- b) A totally new course of five years after school, that incorporates subjects of Human Biology (Anatomy, Physiology, Nutrition, Microbiology, Physics, Chemistry, Psychology etc) with Information Science subjects with more focus on Information resources, Information architecture, Literature Searching and Critical Appraisal)

Which of these options would be better is something that needs to be discussed by current information professionals along with medical professionals who are experts in the areas of EBM.

The human traits required for this profession needs to be identified, and candidates should be selected for such courses after a suitable test for such aptitudes and attitudes. Dedication, attention to detail and the spirit of inquiry and service are very essential for this profession.

Suggested Standards for Clinical Librarians:

Some standards recommended for Hospital Library Consultants are listed in the article written by Gluck et al in 2002. [1]

The standards in the article have been recommended with the concept of a "Hospital Library Consultant", who performs the role of a clinical librarian, and also

oversees the regular library functions during each visit to the hospital. In this model, other library professionals are regular employees of the hospital, but the Clinical Librarian is a consultant who visits on specific days and hours, and works as described above.

These recommendations have been modified with an assumption that in the Indian context, we would have a full time Chief librarian who would perform the role of the clinical librarian, and also head the library, with junior professional staff assisting him or her.

Qualifications:

A clinical librarian must have a Bachelors or Masters degree in Natural Sciences (Biology / Microbiology / Home-Science / Nutrition or equivalent) and master's degree in library or information science from a program that is accredited by an appropriate national body of the country. He or she should have at least three years of medical library experience. An added special training in any aspect of medical librarianship would be an advantage.

If the person does not have all of the above qualifications, he/she should have an equivalent combination of training and experience, or demonstrate unique capabilities in areas such as medical writing / literature searching / critical appraisal.

The Clinical Librarian should have supervisory and administrative experience with the ability to provide assistance on personnel and fiscal issues. He/she must show evidence of regular participation in continuing education courses in consulting, management, health sciences, or hospital librarianship such as those sponsored by the Medical Library Associations or other professional associations.

The consultant must be familiar with existing national, state, and local library networks and have a working knowledge of any Information Management standards and other hospital library-related standards.

Functions and process for Clinical Librarians

1. Identify objectives with the hospital administrator, library staff, or library committee or a combination thereof and other appropriate hospital personnel
2. Conduct a needs assessment for library services profiling all disciplines in the total hospital environment; functional elements identified may include:
 - Placement of library staff within the hospital organizational structure
 - Job descriptions for library staff
 - Library staff recruitment, training, and development
 - Budget
 - Facility planning and space allocation
 - Policies and procedures
 - Availability of current materials for each discipline at the hospital
 - Acquisition, cataloging, arrangement, organization, and evaluation of library materials in any format
 - Negotiation of licensing agreements with vendors of electronic resources
 - Answering of reference questions, performance of searches of KBI resources, and provision of other information
 - Circulation or control of materials
 - Notification of hospital staff of new information in their areas of interest
 - Audiovisual services
 - Provision of patient education materials
 - Promotion of library services
 - Cooperation with other libraries
4. Provide specific written recommendations for administrator, library manager, library committee, or a combination thereof
5. Develop a methodology for implementation of recommendations by hospital employee(s) assigned to the library
6. Evaluate and assess progress regularly

Some challenges for transition

As in any process of change, there are some challenges for transitioning to the evolution of clinical librarians. Some senior librarians may see these new requirements as the need to learn very difficult skills. It is important to ensure that an aptitude test be administered, and these individuals are trained to handle these new skills. For those who find it too difficult, alternate responsibilities need to be assigned. Change is difficult, but methods to handle these simply have to be designed.

Conclusion

The need for the position of Clinical Librarians in India is very strong. Creation of highly skilled professionals who would reduce the burden of finding the best medical information, for doctors would definitely enhance patient care. In India, the candidates who miss making it to medical colleges should be the targets for creation of this breed of professionals. Salaries need to be attractive to attract the right people. There are challenges for the transition, and these need to be tackled effectively.

References:

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